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SUBJECT: CHILDREN OF MARTIAL LAW AND YOUTHFUL POLITICS IN
POLAND'S ELECTIONS

11. (U) Summary: A survey of the youth wings of Poland's political parties and discussions with young voters give a picture of a generation raised in post-communist Poland fairly disengaged from the political process. While dedicated individuals in and out of the party structure try to reverse this trend, the level of grass-roots organization remains weak. To appeal to younger voters, parties are counting on providing representative examples to Poland's youth by fielding young candidates. By focusing on economic issues they hope to appeal to this segment of the population with over 30% unemployment. End summary.

12. (SBU) Emboff and PolFSN met with representatives of Civic Platform (PO), Law and Justice (PiS), Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), Social Democracy of Poland (SdPL) and the Polish Peasant Party (PSL) over the past few weeks to try to ascertain the strategies employed by the parties to attract young voters and understand the circumstances behind the low turnout and lack of interest in politics among Poland's youth. These meetings were mostly conducted with the heads and representatives of each party's youth wing and also included higher-level meetings with some party officials. Emboff focused on the issues facing the youth electorate, the organizational and logistical makeup of the parties and their campaigns vis a vis the youth vote and the impact these campaigns were having on expected participation and turnout by young voters. We did not meet with representatives of Self Defense (SO) nor with the Youth of All Poland, which is associated with the League of Polish Families (LPR), because of their extremist positions.

POLAND'S YOUTH

13. (SBU) Voters aged 18-30 comprise the youth vote for most political parties. (Note: SLD's upper age for youth is 35, which reflects its aging demographics, and allows the current Party Chair and Secretary General (aged 31 and 32 respectively) to be defined as "youth" End Note.) This age group was born in the late 1970s and early 80s, turned 18 (the legal voting age in Poland) in the 1990s and has faint recollections of Poland's communist past. Poland's baby boom, born in the year following the imposition of martial law in December of 1981, will have its first chance to vote during this year's elections and comprises up to 3 million eligible voters. The young electorate in Poland is more highly educated than the rest of the electorate (Poland now has one of the highest rates of university education in Europe) and better traveled than their elders (the past three years have seen nearly 20,000 students a year traveling to the U.S. on the Work and Travel program and estimates have 250,000 Poles living in Ireland and as many as 500,000 in the United Kingdom, most of them under 30).

14. (U) Emboff's contacts defined their typical youth voter to be an educated student or university graduate, living in a mid to large-sized Polish city. The rural-based PSL does not expect to receive many youth votes. An increasing number of articles in the Polish and foreign press (including in the Economist) note the disillusionment of Poland's youth with the political process. Most of the people we spoke with expect the youth turnout to be near 30% (in 2001 it was 34%). This is part of a continuing downward trend for turnout in Poland since the first democratic elections in the early 1990s. Turnout has declined steeply across all age groups, though is perhaps most pronounced for the "first-timers" that may never vote at all.

15. (U) The electorate's top concern, including for its youngest portion, is the country's economic situation, especially an unemployment rate that hovers around 18%. Some estimate the rate for younger Poles to be near 30-35%. In addition to unemployment, younger voters are focused on an on-going debate over proposals to charge tuition at public universities, which are now essentially free.

PARTY ORGANIZATION

16. (U) Poland's political party system--like its government--is centralized with funding and decisions emanating out of

Warsaw. The depth and development of the party structures outside of Warsaw and the major cities varies mostly according to the parties' histories, with the "largest" parties throughout Poland in terms of offices and official members being SLD and PSL, both of whom inherited their Communist predecessors' infrastructures. The youth wings of SLD (the Federation of Young Social Democrats--FMS), and PO are separate entities, associated with but not controlled by the parties themselves. PiS and SdPL have youth groups that receive all of their funding from and are run as a division of the main party. PSL does not have a specific youth division.

17. (SBU) All of the youth organizations we met expect to work as part of the party apparatus during the campaigns, believing that the messages conveyed to the general public via television, radio advertisements and direct mail apply to all voters, be they 18 or 78. The Internet sites of these youth groups toe the parties' lines, but are tailored to their peers and highlight debates, youth meetings and messages about "youth" topics, especially the debate about university fees. The youth wings have been debating one another publicly; though have not garnered much press for their efforts. The concepts of get-out-the-vote efforts and targeted messages are noticeably absent from Polish politicking in general. All the political operators Emboff met responded with blank stares to questions about turnout by demographics, door to door campaigning and Election Day transportation.

18. (SBU) PO and PiS, the center-right parties expected to form the next government, have engaged many young people through their outreach to Poland's Eastern neighbors, especially in support of democracy in Ukraine and Belarus. The youth groups in PO and PiS sent election monitors to Ukraine's 2004 elections and intend to invite Belarusian activists to observe the Polish elections. They have contacts with Belarusian (including the banned Zubr movement), Ukrainian and even Georgian youth movements. PO in particular has been successful in making Belarus and its treatment of the Polish minority an election issue. Some trace its current rise in the polls to a visit to Belarus by PO Presidential candidate Donald Tusk after Belarusian President Lukashenko's crack downs on opposition and Polish minority groups.

19. (U) In asking these various organizers and groups about their parties' attractiveness to young voters, most pointed to the fact that the parties had recruited significant numbers of young candidates to run on the party ticket in parliamentary elections. SLD representatives were particularly well-prepared with a list showing 216 candidates for Parliament under the age of 35 and repeatedly mentioning their youthful new leader. PO talked about its Presidential candidate, known for his "youthful" appearance and affinity for soccer. The head of the PiS youth organization is running for Parliament and the organizer for SdPL ran previously for European Parliament and is an elected member of city government in a suburb of Warsaw. While Emboff did not meet with the LPR-associated Youth of All Poland, recent articles note their increasing strength within the party. In fact, some senior LPR members split off from the party after LPR leader Roman Giertych replaced them with younger supporters on the Parliamentary lists.

WHY VOTE?

10. (SBU) While very few young Poles would advocate a departure from democracy (nor understand what that would mean) there is a strong feeling among Poland's young adults that there is little value to participating in the elections. As graduates of some of Poland's best universities find themselves having to choose between washing dishes in London and living at home because the jobs available do not pay enough to rent an apartment, there has been an increasing sense of alienation from politics. Emboff has heard time and again from well-educated, well-employed young Poles that no party or candidate represents their interests and that all the major parties and candidates are part of a corrupt and incompetent system. Most of those who intend to vote will do so to deny one of the extremist parties a good showing and will vote in favor of the "less evil" candidate.

COMMENT

11. (SBU) In nearly every instance that a young potential voter referred to "picking the lesser evil," they were referring to PO and Donald Tusk. There are no statistics to show if any of PO's recent rise in the polls results from an increase in support from young voters, but PO's centrist positions and liberal economic values make it a natural choice for a group that only knows the capitalist system and has no recollection, yet alone affinity for the "good old

days." At the same time, the number of respondents in polls claiming that they intend to vote in the Parliamentary and Presidential elections is increasing, though these responses are not broken out by age group. Whether or not they vote in large numbers in the upcoming elections, these young people will have to become engaged, both politically and economically, for Poland to succeed in the future.